

The Church and Its Growth

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[0 : 0 0] It hasn't really been a very good morning. I got up this morning, went out to the car and the battery was dead. So I tried our car to go, which I've never tried before, and it worked happily.

Picked up a parishioner on the way to church, got to church and these lights have gone. So we are no longer in the spotlight. But we're trying this bistro ambience for a little while and there'll be some quiet music provided by Aaron.

Whenever he sees someone going to sleep. And now I've just lost my microphone. So where are we at? Actually, this is a really great Sunday to be together because in this chapter we look at why we come together and what the purpose of church is.

What are you doing here? We've been looking at a series on the church that Jesus builds through this term. And truly, what is it that we should expect when we gather?

What are we to be committed to together? And at one level, 1 Corinthians 14, is a contrast between just two of the spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues and prophecy.

[1 : 1 3] And Paul's Christian friends in the city of Corinth valued tongues much more than prophecy because it was more exciting and seemed more spiritual to them.

And while the apostle never puts down, he never denigrates the gift of tongues, he wants them to reverse their values because he wants to show them what true maturity looks like.

And I know many of us come to this passage a little nervous, some of us with prejudice, some of us with fear. There are some churches that never talk about these kinds of things and there are some churches that talk about nothing else.

And I don't know what your background is or what your experience is. And the problem is that we Christians tend to polarize and become pendulum-like on all sorts of issues.

And this whole question is one of those. So on one extreme, you have people who call themselves cessationists.

[2 : 1 7] And they say, God has ceased giving any of these kinds of gifts, miracles and tongues and healings. And anything today that looks like that has to be a fake. They're not a very fun group.

On the... Sorry, I shouldn't characterize a group, should I? Some of you may be cessationists. Who's to tell? On the other extreme, there are those who say, these are the most important, most exciting and most obvious evidence that the Holy Spirit is working.

And anyone who says anything against them is quenching the Spirit. And there are all sorts of soft positions in between. So on this side, some people, and I count many of my friends amongst this, think that tongue speaking is a bit weird and they say prophecy is just preaching.

So get on, Mr. Preacher, preach. And a softer position on this side is those who say, well, we need to do exactly what the early Christians did in the book of Acts and Jesus.

We need to speak in tongues and raise the dead and then the world will sit up and take notice. But despite the fact there is a sustained contrast between speaking in tongues and prophecy, that is not the real issue.

[3 : 33] The issue is one of love and maturity. Did you notice verse 20 as Ben's read it? Just look down at verse 20.

Brothers and sisters, says the Apostle Paul, do not be children in your thinking. That's pretty strong. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking, be mature.

Grow up, he says to the church. And I said this at the last service. I can only remember one person ever saying that to us at St. John's. It was Fran Robinson at a vestry meeting.

Some of you are probably there. She just told us to grow up and I thought, that's a great word. I needed to hear it. Here are two very different visions of spiritual maturity.

The Corinthian view is true spiritual maturity is freedom for me to express my gifts and to have these experiences, to focus on my rights and my growth.

[4 : 28] And the Apostle Paul says, no, true spiritual maturity has to do with Jesus Christ and how to love and build up others.

And I love the church at Corinth because it's here in the New Testament. It's one of the messiest, most arrogant, divided, terrible, immature congregations and it gives us all hope, I think.

It was a lively church to go to. You know, their Holy Communion services were sort of boozy social occasions where people were fighting for top seats.

They were fiercely divided and they were sexually further out than the pagan culture around about them. They were very gifted and very knowledgeable and immature and arrogant, which is a terrible combination, as I said last week.

And they were very easily over-impressed with externals and what was, you know, what had pizzazz and particularly ecstatic emotional gatherings.

[5 : 33] They thought of themselves and they were proud of it. And what the Apostle does in this little section in 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14 is he tries to redirect their hearts.

And in chapter 12 he speaks about what are spiritual people, what do spiritual people really look like? In chapter 13, what's a spiritual life and what's the fruit of that look like?

And in chapter 14, what's a spiritual gathering look like? And do you remember last week, if you weren't there, you won't remember, but last week we dropped into chapter 12. It's quite a surprise that what's spiritual, spiritual people cannot be measured by the intensity of my spiritual and my emotional experience.

The true godly spirituality cannot be measured by the size or correctness of my theological knowledge. But it's whether we come to believe and to live out the simple truth that Jesus Christ is Lord, Lord of me, Lord of you, Lord of all.

And remember, God has distributed gifts throughout the body, throughout the church, so that we might use them to build each other up. And we looked last week at the way in which we avoid this by either self-deprecation or self-inflation.

[6 : 51] And then we came to chapter 13. And I want to say this again, I want to say it gently and kindly, but chapter 13 wasn't written with weddings in mind.

You know, it wasn't just a couple of thoughts on love, just, you know, thrown here. I think I've thrown some thoughts on love. It's written between chapter 12 and chapter 14 in a congregation that's deeply divided, arrogant and immature.

And right at the heart of the issue is that spiritual maturity is to be like Jesus. And to be like Jesus means to love. It's what it's doing there. So now in chapter 14, the apostle shifts his focus now and asks the question, what is a spiritual gathering?

What is a gathering that pleases God? And through this chapter, you can see, I think it's six times, verse 4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 26.

He speaks about in the gathering, in the assembly, in the church, what are we meant to meet for? And you know, if you've been a Christian for a little while, there is no New Testament blueprint for our gatherings.

[8 : 00] There's no liturgy that's been dropped down from heaven. So it's very important for us to figure out what he's saying here. What is the church for? How can you tell if it's been a spirit-filled gathering?

What does it look like? What should we expect? What should we be committed to? And the apostle makes basically three points in the section that we read a moment ago.

And so I'm going to look at three things. And the first point is by far the longest. I say that in case you get fatigued during the first point. But if you do, if I look and find someone fatigued, I'll get Aaron to get up and play the harp for us.

That should wake us all up. So the first thing we should expect, the first thing that pleases God, the first thing we should be committed to, is a spirit-filled gathering builds up people.

Very simple. And this is verses 1 to 5. And you can see in verse 1, love is at the top of the agenda again. And pursue love, he says, earnestly desire the spiritual gift, especially to prophesy.

[9 : 06] Pursue love. It's a hunting word. Hunt it down. Target it. Get it. Keep getting it. Present tense. Urgently. Now. And let me just read these next words, although they're read so well.

For one, verse 2, For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men, but to God. For no one understands him, he utters mysteries in the spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people, men and women, boys and girls, for their up-building, very key word, encouragement and consolation.

The one who speaks in a tongue builds himself up. But the one who prophesies builds up the church. I want you all to speak in tongues, so I'm happy for you to all speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy, because the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets.

So that the church may be built up. That's the key word. It's throughout the chapter, the word build up. It's a construction word, edify. We don't use that word very much these days, edify.

It means putting bricks on top of each other, or wood, and constructing something. And it's used metaphorically of building up people as well. Here is God's expectation of what we are to do when we gather together.

[10 : 27] We are to come in, and instead of looking at the people around you and just admiring them, or just being patient with them, or tearing them down, Christian love works to build them up to strengthen them in their faith.

Verse 4. When we come together as a body, we are meant to edify, build up one another. And that's what the Holy Spirit loves to do. That's why he's given every single one of us spiritual gifts.

It's so that we will build others here in faith, and in hope, and in love, and in unity, and in purity. And in Corinth, they were taking the spiritual gifts that the Spirit had given to use to build up, and they were using it to build their own little empires, and as barriers to each other, and as division.

And it's quite possible for us to do the same. I mean, there are some churches, some churches that focus on gifts like entertainment or music, and there are other churches that think preaching and teaching is the be-all and end-all of any gifts.

But we know, don't we, that giftedness and knowledge is not enough. There has to be love. If we are to grow to maturity, and if we're going to build one another up, there has to be love.

[11 : 46] And this is the first concern of God that we build up one another in our faith. Self-sufficiency, self-deprecation, self-indulgence, it's not going to edify anyone.

The amazing thing about this is, do you remember the first time we began looking at the church back in September? We heard Jesus' promise where he says, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

It's exactly the same word the apostle uses here. How will Jesus build his church? It's through us. It's as we seek to edify one another.

And for the church in Corinth, simply meant seeking prophecy more than speaking in tongues. Now, I have neatly avoided and escaped saying anything about tongues and prophecy.

You'll notice the time has come. And it doesn't matter what I say, I'm bound to disappoint some. But let me make a few comments. And that's normal. That's part of the job.

[12 : 49] However, let me make some comments. Firstly, about speaking in tongues. And I think the first thing to say is that no one can say for certain what was going on in Corinth.

And nobody can say definitely whether the experience of some of us today of speaking in tongues was the same thing that was going on in Corinth. Professor Gordon Fee, who is Professor Emeritus at Regent, I count as a personal friend, a Pentecostal pastor, he wrote this brief commentary on the book of 1 Corinthians.

It's a wonderful commentary. And heavy. And he says that trying to define what the gifts of tongues are here is irrelevant.

In the light of Paul's larger concerns in the context of love and building up, which I find fascinating. But what we can say is this, the gift of tongues in Corinth was different than the gift of tongues that appeared on the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts.

You remember? When the risen and sent of Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on his church, the apostles spoke in tongues and those tongues were heard in every other language.

[14 : 06] It didn't matter what native tongue you had, you would hear clearly in your tongue what they were speaking. Theologians refer it to a xenoglossia, a new party word for you.

However, in 1 Corinthians 14, what we learn about speaking in tongues is this. It seems to be a form of prayer addressed to God, likely ecstatic speech.

And it's not understood either by the person who's speaking it or by the people who are listening unless there's someone to interpret what's being said. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the individual and it builds them up individually, verse 4.

And in verse 18, the apostle Paul says, I have the gift of tongues but I would rather speak five clear words than 10,000 words in a tongue in the assembly, in the gathering.

Because he says, when I speak in tongues, it's not going to edify you, it'll just edify me. It's lovely. I mean, the apostle is very gentle here. He will not forbid people to do that.

[15 : 15] He won't put a line and say, it's wrong to do it. He just points out what is most loving. Think about what's most loving and what's going to build up others. Or let me take prophecy.

Again, there's no definition of what prophecy is here in the chapter. And I have another small book that I went through this week.

This is a commentary on 1 Corinthians by Anthony Thistleton. And it's great for building muscles. It has probably twice the words that Dr. Fees does.

And Aaron has read all of it. He said to me this week. To his children. Were they having trouble sleeping?

Actually, it's a wonderful commentary too. But he says, we just can't be sure. Let me just pause here and say, if you're someone who's really interested in this and would like to pursue further, here is a book that's 200 pages.

[16 : 18] It's by D.A. Carson who is a Canadian theologian. And for my money, this is the very best thing written on 1 Corinthians 12, 13, 14. And I can give you the title later.

However, what we can say about prophecy here and in the rest of the New Testament is this. And this is generalizations. It's not the same as Old Testament prophecy.

Old Testament prophecy, the Old Testament prophets, the ones who are the real prophets, would say, thus says the Lord and they would reveal something from heaven.

But here, this is something for all Christians. All of us are able to prophesy and the Apostle Paul expects every one of us, every one of you and me to prophesy to one another.

We use this word prophetic today to speak of speakers who have real great contemporary significance or who speak about the future. That's not really what's going on here.

[17 : 19] Whatever else it is in verses 3, 4 and 5, it is intelligible speech which builds up others around them, builds up, encourages and consoles.

Now, I don't want to go too far off track and astray but if you just let me, I want to say one or two more things about prophecy.

The sticking point in prophecy always comes with this idea of revelation. Three times in this chapter, verse 6, verse 26 and verse 30, the Apostle speaks of revelation happening to someone in the assembly and then them speaking it out as prophecy.

Now, I hope this is helpful. If this is not an interest of yours, just think about how you can build someone up after the service. I think the word revelation is an important word because the Apostle Paul uses it in at least two very different ways.

First, I'll call it Revelation A and Revelation A is when God, the Holy Spirit, directly reveals something to an apostle and it's written down in Scripture. So, if you keep your finger in 1 Corinthians 14 and turn right about 15 pages to Galatians chapter 1.

[18 : 37] 11 pages. Galatians chapter 1, verse 11. The Apostle Paul again is writing, I would have you know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

It's not a human gospel. I did not receive it from any human nor was I taught it but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. The gospel came directly to him from God.

That's why, one of the reasons he's an apostle. But there is, the Apostle Paul also uses the word revelation for a lesser experience, something we would likely call illumination today.

Where the Holy Spirit takes something that's been revealed already in Scriptures and opens our hearts and minds and spirits so that we understand it afresh. So, let's go right to the very next book, to the book of Ephesians.

chapter 1, verse 16. Again, the Apostle Paul is praying for the Christians in Ephesus and in verse 16 he says, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him having the eyes of your heart enlightened that you may know the hope to which you have been called.

[20 : 08] Now, this kind of revelation is not, we don't write this down in Scripture, this kind of revelation is that our hearts and minds open up and understand afresh and more deeply the gospel that we already know and it can happen in any circumstance, it can happen in a moment of crisis, it can happen when you're cooking dinner, it can happen when you're babysitting a child, it can happen when you're playing golf if you've got time to do that, it can happen as we're gathered here in the congregation, as we listen to the Bible read or as you sing a hymn or as you, I've had people come out and they've become Christians during the singing of hymns at St John's, as we say the creed or as we listen to the word of God or entirely on your own and I think it's this kind of revelation B that stands behind New Testament prophecy, lovely stories all over the church, you hear again and again, someone in a small group as they're praying, a fresh understanding of something comes to their mind when they speak it out, that's prophecy and this is what we're meant to be doing for each other.

Let me just say, if there are questions about this afterwards, I might stand here after the service if I want to speak about it a bit.

I just want to point out, this is a massive reversal of the way we usually think about coming to church. You see, this is not coming to church for my own personal spiritual experience.

It means coming to church to build up those round about me. See, if you think coming to church is about your own spiritual experience, then, when you roll over on Sunday morning and say, I don't really feel I want to go, I don't really feel I need to go, then you think, you imagine, that the only person who misses out is you.

But it's the opposite is the truth. If there are 200 people here, it's not 200 people having individualistic experiences of the Holy Spirit. Public worship is not each of us having our own thing with God, but we gather together to encounter God together so that we might build up those around about us.

[22 : 21] And if you miss a week, you know who misses out, it's not you, but us. And I know we've got to be willing to receive and we've got to be willing to give, but if Christ is building his church through us as we build each other up, well, you know where I'm going.

It's we who miss out if you're not here. Now, I know there are good reasons. This is not a law, good reasons not to be here. I nearly didn't make it this morning. But if you're here, this is why it really matters how we sing.

Because in our singing, we're meant to be building each other up. It really matters how we listen to the Bible read, how we pray together, how we welcome each other before and after, how we listen to the preaching of God's word.

You see, we have a written form of liturgy and the key reason for a written liturgy was because in the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church services had come to the point where it was basically a one-man show.

The priest would get up, he would do the mass and the people were there as spectators. And the reformers came along and said, they went back to 1 Corinthians 14. Cramner writes about 1 Corinthians 14 and he says, no, no, no, no.

[23 : 35] If we're going to gather together, it needs to be congregational. The congregation needs to participate. And so I want to just show you a little bit of how it works.

Let's go back to the beginning of the service and start again, shall we? Let's go back to page 2. I'd like to spend more time on this, but I'm just going to do it very quickly.

But what happens is we are walked through a sequence of words and actions that begin with our coming to understand the depth of our need of God's grace.

Secondly, the magnificence of the supply of grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. And thirdly, our proclamation of the grace of God in our response.

Those three things. So we begin, and the way we do it here is we begin with a verse from Scripture because all true worship is a response to the word of God. Then we sing and then we begin the first pattern.

[24 : 40] That is, we come to speak about our need of God's grace. So at the bottom of the page, Almighty God unto whom all hearts be open, that's a prayer that God would open our hearts and cleanse us.

And we all pray together, not the priest alone, if you turn the page. Then we say a summary of the commandments is an examination of our hearts because we need to know our need of grace.

And then we have these little prayers. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy on us all. And we pray the collect where we collect our prayers together. And every collect is a prayer that God would strengthen us and supply our needs.

And then we hear from the word of God. You see, 1 Corinthians, the reading comes. And we start to hear the word of grace to us. And the psalm we heard today, Psalm 126, that's a cracker of a psalm.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we are like those who dream. The Lord has filled our mouths with laughter. That's a fantastic psalm. And then we begin to respond and we proclaim the greatness of God's grace.

[25 : 42] That's why we say the creed. And then I'm trying to do the same thing here in the sermon. And if you turn over to page 6, we begin that sequence all over again. We confess our sins together, recognising our need for grace.

Then we hear the words, the comfortable words, which is the gospel. And then we pray the words of administration which explain how God has supplied our needs in Jesus Christ.

And we come and receive. And then after receiving communion, again we praise God, Gloria, Prayer, Psalms, Singing. However, I've gone very long on point one.

My simple point, Paul's simple point is this. How do we measure a spirit-filled gathering? It builds up the church. And I want to encourage you.

If you go home today, go home any Sunday, and you've said a word or you've done something that might comfort, encourage, console another person, I reckon that's a pretty good morning.

[26 : 47] And as you come to church, if you're a regular member, you should pray. Lord, give me an opportunity to build someone else up. That's what he expects. That's what we should expect and be committed to. So points two and three, very briefly.

If the spirit-filled gathering builds up, it also makes clear. It's intelligible. And while we're on things Anglican, I can't resist this. If you take up your wine-coloured prayer book and turn to the back, please, to the 39 articles, page 707.

The 39 articles are basically the theology on which, how we do theology as Anglicans.

And they're very good reading. Not in church. They're very good reading. They're written in old, actually they're written originally in Latin, but I want to look at article 24 because it's making exactly the point that Paul makes here.

Of speaking in the congregation in such a tongue as the people understandeth. It is a thing plainly repugnant to the word of God and the custom of the primitive church to have public prayer in the church or to minister the sacraments in a tongue not understood of the people.

[28 : 10] Is that clear? It's a bit ironic reading it in old English like that, but you get the gist, don't you? Initially, the target was the Latin, the Latin mass.

Cramner said that this comes from 1 Corinthians where the apostle Paul shows that this is a principle in the assembly to those who speak in tongues. You cannot edify another person unless you make yourself clear and intelligible.

So we go back to 1 Corinthians verse 6. If I come to you speaking in tongues how am I going to benefit you unless I bring a revelation or a knowledge or prophecy or teaching?

And then the apostle reels off a series of illustrations to make his point. First he begins with musical instruments and he says if you play a musical instrument and you just play one note you don't make any sense.

It's not music. Unless of course you play the bagpipes. Music is based on difference, distinction. Or if you take the bugle he says if you make a foggy, vague little sound how are the troops going to know whether to go forward or to go backwards?

[29 : 19] Or if I meet with you to talk and to be encouraged and you speak to me in Urdu you're going to make me feel like a foreigner or like I don't belong. I was born in Africa and grew up there after we returned to Australia during my teen years my parents would sometimes speak to each other in Swahili.

They did that when they were having a fight with each other and they didn't want us to know what was going on or they were you know telling some sort of secret. But my older sister and I had been there long enough to understand everything that they were saying but we didn't tell them until we left home.

That's the opposite of what we're trying to do in church. We're not trying to deliberately exclude anyone or make anyone feel like they don't belong.

Please don't misunderstand me. The aim of our gathering is not to make you feel comfortable or contented. At the heart of what we do together week by week is the cross of Jesus Christ Jesus dying demonstrating the reality of our evil and of God's grace and supply and we exult in the cross of Christ but we are never comfortable before it.

But how we speak and how we do things together in each gathering must be in such a way that we don't put any unnecessary barriers in the way for each other.

[30 : 44] Especially if it's incomprehensible. And if we are currently doing anything that makes you feel like you don't belong or you're not welcome we need to repent and you need to tell us what that is.

Now as Anglicans we are committed to this form of service. It's a brilliant form I said before walking us through this sequence of the gospel. But we are not committed to the Elizabethan language.

And one of the reasons we stayed with the old book I've been here 20 years now was because the alternatives were so I find a gentle word they were so biblically unsound.

We are now part of the Anglican Church of North America and they've been working hard on a new prayer book that is in modern English. And they've just released the first drafts and our bishops have encouraged us to use them and have a look at them and I started to look at them and I must say morning prayer is great Holy Communion is disappointing very disappointing and I'm not going to we're not going to suddenly introduce them one Sunday morning but I just want to say they are a step I believe in the right direction because you see the apostle is writing to the church in Corinth saying you need to change your worship so that it will be more intelligent more intelligible I'm sorry more comprehensible because you can't build up other people unless it's comprehensible and intelligible so the first thing God wishes is that we build up the second is that it's clear and thirdly and more briefly if the Holy Spirit is in the driving seat the gospel will be comprehensible not just to the insider but to the outsider verse 23 if therefore the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues and outsiders or unbelievers

I think he's speaking about the same group there enter will they not say that you're all out of your minds but if all prophesy speaking intelligibly and an unbeliever or outsider enters he is convicted by all called to account by all the secrets of his heart are disclosed and so falling on his face he will worship God and declare that God is really among you outsiders and unbelievers are our friends and family and neighbours who are not Christians and the expectation of God and of the apostle is that non-Christians will be present and will come and be with us here in Christian worship not because it's a great entertaining show but usually through private and personal invitations and you may be someone here today who is like that who's been invited by a friend we're very glad you're here and it's a great day to be here because God himself has a word for you but if you're a Christian who has the gift of speaking in tongues the apostle says don't use it in the gathering because it won't help your Christian friends and your non-Christian friends will probably think you're out of your mind and I just want to pause and say there are many of us here at St. John's that have the gift of speaking in tongues and I want to commend you for never making it an issue in the assembly that demonstrates

[34 : 10] I think spiritual maturity but if we gather here and we are praying and praising God and speaking in a way that is comprehensible the simple truth is that the Holy Spirit is able to take what we are doing together and bring conviction and conversion into the heart of someone who's not a believer and the apostle is writing to this church in Corinth saying you need to modify your worship to make the good news of Jesus Christ more comprehensible to non-Christians isn't that interesting you see because through us if we are obeying these words the Holy Spirit is able to generate a spiritual awareness in other people bringing conviction of their own sin bringing them to a place to recognise that God is real God is judge that he's offering forgiveness of sins so that they might bow before him and join us as they come to see that God is real and speaks and saves so this is what we should be expecting when we gather this is what we should be committed to to build one another up to do so clearly and comprehensively and in a way that others may join us in the worship of the living God and this fulfils exactly what Jesus said when he said

God is spirit and those who worship him worship him in spirit and truth and God is seeking such to worship him so let's kneel and pray together and he says the